

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

FAILING TO THINK: THE PROMISE OF PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY

JAMES CORBY UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

Thinking performance philosophy

To use a contemporary colloquialism, Performance Philosophy ‘is a thing.’ And with related associations, conferences and publications, it is fast becoming a thing of impressive proportions and complexity, especially given how recently it has emerged from the interstices and confluence of theatre studies, philosophy and performance studies. This is perhaps not surprising—*performance* has, in recent decades, emerged as a theoretical and practical site of possible renewal and development not only of theatre but of the arts more widely, and the emergence of performance philosophy is a recognition of this potential in relation to philosophy.¹

The relationship between performance and philosophy is long, multi-faceted and occasionally fraught, with philosophers through the ages frequently both harnessing and suspecting performance’s power. Plato’s dialogues famously show one way in which philosophical thinking cannot be separated from a certain performance, and yet a fear of the potential of performance-oriented mimesis, freed from a service to truth, leads Plato to exclude poets—the performance artists of their day—from the polis.² This closely imbricated relationship between performance and philosophy continued throughout the philosophical tradition, emerging as particularly important in the work of thinkers whose work is not in any obvious way affected by the so-called anti-theatrical bias characteristic of Platonism.³

Performance Philosophy marks a more explicit and concerted recognition of the connection between philosophy and performance and the potential affordances of that connection.⁴ The performance philosophy movement marshals relevant energies in such a way as to suggest that we stand at the threshold of a new disciplinary formation. Not Performance *and* Philosophy, but Performance Philosophy—the paratactical momentum of the term seemingly directed towards an artistic, intellectual, and disciplinary miscegenation, where neither performance nor philosophy would remain distinct and intact and neither would be subordinated to, or conditioned by, the unchanged disciplinary genealogy and underpinnings of the other. As Esa Kirkkopelto remarks, ‘Performance philosophy opens up a field in which performance, performance makers and performers can make contact with philosophical thinking without the advocacy of intermediary disciplines and in equal dialogue with them, learn to think in their own terms, and become understood by others’ (2015, 4–6). This is perhaps the promise of interdisciplinarity in its truest sense, if that institutionally ubiquitous word can momentarily be recovered from its bland overuse in countless funding applications, impact reports, and worthy PhD proposals. Here, interdisciplinarity would be the extension of knowledge and academic practices beyond their presumed native territory, precisely by virtue of the interaction and mutual provocation of at least two academic disciplines. This new knowledge and transformed practice can then be assimilated into either discipline, thereby modifying that discipline, or it can detach from its parent disciplines, forming a new discrete discipline or, more modestly, a sub-discipline in its own right.

This could be what is in prospect for Performance Philosophy. Already there is a Performance Philosophy research network with almost three thousand members, a Performance Philosophy book series published by Palgrave Macmillan, numerous closely related conferences, and the *Performance Philosophy* journal launched in 2015. But it is still early days, of course, and the focus on defining and shaping what Performance Philosophy might become continues to dominate. In 2013 at the University of Surrey there was the conference ‘What is Performance Philosophy? Staging a New Field.’ In 2015 in Chicago the conference ‘What Can Performance Philosophy Do?’ took place, in 2017 in Prague there was the ‘How Does Performance Philosophy Act?’ conference, and there have been several other large-scale conferences and smaller symposia on the relation between performance and philosophy. So, there is a good deal of institutional momentum, and many of the trappings of a distinct academic field, but conceptually Performance Philosophy is still characterized predominantly by an attitude either of exploration or, less positively but no less understandably, uncertainty and hesitation. As Rüdiger H. Rimpler puts it, ‘as long as the field of performance philosophy is still emerging, definition-making seems to be accidental’ (2016, 23).

While it is not yet a very clear what Performance Philosophy is, or will become, there is a very strong sense of what it ought not to be. Principally, it ought not to be a proliferation of examples of how particular performances apply, illustrate or demonstrate pre-existing philosophical ideas. This positions it against a broadly Platonic conception of the appropriate relation between philosophy and art, which would reduce art to being a kind explicative or illustrative handmaiden of philosophy—stained glass windows for the Gospels, as it were.

The general hope seems to be, in ascending degrees of ambition: first, that performance can be understood as extending existing knowledge; second, that performance be recognized as a kind of thinking in its own right—whatever that means; and, third, that Performance Philosophy might ‘transform [...] our very ways of conceptualising.’ That’s an extraordinary claim, but it is raised as a possibility in the call for papers for the 2015 conference ‘Thinking Through Tragedy and Comedy: Performance Philosophy and the Future of Genre,’ for instance. Freddie Rokem, more moderately, in what has been taken up as something of a rallying cry for Performance Philosophy, articulates the situation thus:

how can artistic practice be considered a form of research? and what kind of thinking is produced by such artistic and creative practices? These are some of the most urgent issues on the agenda of today’s institutions of higher education, in particular in those where the humanities and the arts still play an important role. (2010, 5)

These hopes for Performance Philosophy are admirably bold, and their motives understandable, but they need to be sounded a little further. Is the distinction between illustrating pre-existing ideas and the creation of new ones as clear cut as it might at first appear? What is meant by the creation of ideas in performance and in what sense should that be thought of as a ‘thinking’ not reducible to a philosophical procedure or explanation? To put this another way: if performance philosophy is indeed now ‘a thing,’ as I suggest at the start of this essay, is its thinghood (*dingen*, to use familiar Heideggerian terminology) equatable in some way with a singular thinking (*denken*)? And how does this bring into play the reciprocal possibility, namely that philosophy can be understood as performance? Is the implied distinction between thinking in philosophy and thinking in performance a valid one? How should embodied thinking be understood? Are we to understand philosophical thinking as disembodied in some sense? Or are there genre- or practice-specific forms of thinking that resist translation from one medium to the other? In the hybridized dream of performance philosophy, is there not a risk of philosophical expectations inadvertently serving to limit and thus weaken performance’s creative efficacy? To address these questions fully is beyond the scope of this essay, but as a prolegomenon to that work I would like to explore what might be claimed for Performance Philosophy and how this departs from or parallels similar interdisciplinary ventures also involving philosophy. Towards the end of the essay I will explore the possibility that the potency of Performance Philosophy’s relation to thinking lies in its capacity to have a negating effect, wherein the failure to produce knowledge as such (typically considered the successful culmination of thought) might be considered a valuable cognitive procedure particular to performance that is valuable in its own right.

I would like to think a little about what philosophy might be taken to signify in the articulation ‘Performance Philosophy.’ What, that is to say, does the word ‘philosophy’ bring to the Performance Philosophy equation? There are, no doubt, many possible answers to this question—it is arguably *the* question of Performance Philosophy—but let us start simply, perhaps naively, and assume philosophy is a form of rational enquiry concerned with knowledge and truth. If that is the case, one would expect Performance Philosophy to involve focusing attention on the possible ways

performance might give rise to knowledge—insights into truths about ourselves and the world. A related question would then be whether the method and means by which performance leads to knowledge and truths are in some way the same as philosophy's? Characteristically, philosophy is thought of as leading to knowledge and truths by means of thinking—does performance lead to knowledge and truths and, if so, should the process by which this happens also be understood as 'thinking'?

Of course, there is much about this question, and the way that I have set it up, that is contestable. One might disagree that philosophy is a rational enquiry concerned with disclosing or establishing knowledge and truth. And even if one were to agree with that, there are likely to be different claims about what is meant by 'thinking,' 'knowledge,' and 'truth.' Let us take 'knowledge,' it is a more capacious term than 'truth' and is traditionally perhaps more recognizably the concern of philosophy than 'thinking,' which might simply be considered the means by which we attain knowledge (though it would be valid to ask whether performance can be understood as a type of thinking that leads to something other than knowledge and truth—and this is something that we will explore later). What does it mean to speak about knowledge in relation to performance? This question immediately begets another, of course, because how we answer it depends in large part on what we mean by performance. One might reel off a list of loose traits, qualities, and family resemblances that can indicate performance: liveness, embodied action, relational, durational, witnessed, socially engaged, ephemeral. 'Performance's only life,' argues Peggy Phelan, 'is in the present':

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. [...] Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance. (1993, 146)

Shannon Jackson is surely right, though, when she claims that the term performance remains 'resolutely imprecise' (Jackson 2011, 13). It might be helpful and illuminating to ask the same question—about the relation with knowledge—in relation to *theatre*, which, as the supposedly more conventional relative of performance, perhaps offers a comparatively rather more stable and easily graspable referent. So, what might it mean to speak about knowledge in relation to theatre? But this move simply makes apparent the need, first of all, to understand more clearly what is meant by knowledge.

Performance and forms of knowledge

Epistemology is a complex and disputed field of study, but philosophers generally tend to agree that there are three basic forms of knowledge: propositional knowledge, acquaintance or familiarity, and practical mastery or 'know-how' (Williams 2001, 15). Epistemology is principally concerned with propositional knowledge. As Raymond Geuss explains, '[p]ropositional knowledge or "knowing that" takes its name from the usual grammatical form in which such a claim to knowledge is expressed: the use of the verb "know" plus "that" plus a propositional clause' (2005,

185). An example would be: I know *that* elephants are larger than mice. If we are to get to grips with the possibility that performance is a form of thinking that gives rise to a form of knowledge, one first of all ought to ask whether performance can be understood as conveying and being concerned with this sort of knowledge. And I do not mean in any incidental way, but in a way that can be understood either as a significant part of what performance—and by extension theatre—does, or as constituting a relatively minor aspect of performance, albeit one that produces significant propositional knowledge. Would this be something for Performance Philosophy to focus on and explore as a possible way of understanding the relationship between performance and thinking? It seems unlikely. There is of course a long tradition of broadly didactic theatre that mixes instruction with pleasure in various ways. It is a notion that can be traced back to Horace's *Ars Poetica*, where he writes:

Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life. [...] He has won every vote who has blended profit and pleasure, at once delighting and instructing the reader. ([c.19 BCE] 1942, 479)

This idea proved influential on Renaissance humanism: notably, it informs Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* ([1595] 2004), and is the *raison d'être* of morality plays. A little later, Ben Jonson, in the Prologue to *Volpone*, tells his readers that his aim is 'to mixe profit with your pleasure' ([1605] 1998, 221). Subsequently, it remains a common motivation in the development of drama, from Brechtian *Lehrstücke*, to thesis drama, to *agit-prop*, and so on. It is impossible to conceive of such drama without an animating intention to convey propositional knowledge. And it is no doubt possible to extract propositional knowledge from drama that is not in any obvious sense didactic. For example, for several years I gave lectures on Tom Stoppard's play *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006) to an undergraduate class, and it was clear that for many of the students the play offered a history lesson about the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution. As a result of having watched or read that play, at least some of those students came to possess propositional knowledge such as: 'I know *that* in Czechoslovakia in 1968 Alexander Dubček attempted to implement a series of modernizing, liberalising reforms.' This meets a typical expectation associated with propositional knowledge, namely that once formulated and accepted it becomes discrete content. That is to say, such knowledge is not tied in any particular way to the instances of its articulation—once 'extracted,' it can be asserted without further propositional contextualisation.

But I would hazard to claim that this sort of propositional content is hardly what people value about theatre. In fact, the conveyance of propositional knowledge seems irrelevant (or, at the most, incidental) with regard to the perceived success or failure of a piece of drama or other type of performance. And, as I have already said, proponents of Performance Philosophy have already stated quite clearly that they are not interested in the mere performative illustration of pre-existing (that is, detachable, propositional) knowledge, which, to reiterate, is precisely the sort of performance that Plato, dismissing Homeric tragedians from the *polis*, sees as the only acceptable use of performance. But what if performance, rather than simply illustrating propositional knowledge, were able to generate new propositional knowledge? Would this be significant and perhaps of interest for Performance Philosophy? Well, drawing on theatre again, let us go back to

the Stoppard example. Some of my students—not all by any means—enjoyed that play so much that they completely accepted the grand architectonics of the play, which invite us to see parallels between rock ‘n’ roll, acts of political resistance, revolution, love, the Greek god Pan, and Sapphic poetry. One of those students might, to this day, be carrying around what they take to be propositional knowledge based on this. They might say: ‘I know *that* a common anarchic, erotic spirit animated Sapphic love poetry, rock ‘n’ roll, and revolutionary movements in the late twentieth century.’ The truth or otherwise of this knowledge is not really what is important here. What is significant is that the play has offered an insight that can then, potentially, be taken up and treated as propositional knowledge. As far as I know, this is not the articulation of a pre-existing idea, despite it possessing a certain generic familiarity, and it seems likely that although it can be treated as detachable content it retains some sort of tie to the site of its initial articulation, insofar as that site, the play-in-performance in the case of this example, put forward the idea in question convincingly. Where would Performance Philosophy stand on this? And is it so very different to what philosophy, even on a rather conservative estimation, does? Let us take a classical example. It seems fairly uncontroversial to say that Plato is concerned with propositional knowledge (what, in the classical context we might think of as *epistêmê*, as opposed to *technê*, which would be a different kind of knowledge—something more akin to skill or know-how). It is on the basis of this propositional knowledge that Socrates, in the dialogues, corrects the mistaken opinions of his interlocutors about what it means to be virtuous. But, like Stoppard’s play, the dialogues are the sites of persuasion and artifice. Having read the *Republic* one might be convinced *that* pleasure, divorced from knowledge, is inherently dangerous. There is, of course, content there that can be extracted, but it continues to retain much of its authority as truth (if that is what one takes it to be, of course) thanks to the rhetorical force of its original—or, to be safer, its classical—articulation in the *Republic*. Viewed in this way, the dialogues in the *Republic* are as much performances and performative as they are philosophy and philosophical, with truthful propositional knowledge only emerging and possessing traction via a sort of drama of ideas.⁵ The distinctions do not seem at all sure.

But I doubt this would satisfy the hopes that there seem to be for Performance Philosophy. Once a Socratic dialogue, or a Tom Stoppard play, establishes knowledge, though the association between that knowledge and the performative site of its definitive articulation might persist, there is no reason to think that there could not be an equally compelling account of that knowledge given elsewhere in another form—in a lecture or an essay, perhaps, or even, conceivably, in a dance performance or installation work. I suspect that for something like propositional knowledge to be acceptable as the principal focus of Performance Philosophy research its more ardent adherents would ideally want to be able to say of it that there are certain truths to which access can be had only through performance. The temptation is to see this as an inclination towards a kind of medium specificity, but it makes little sense to think of performance as *a medium*. Perhaps a practice specificity? Or maybe Performance Philosophy could be concerned with instances of performance-specific knowledge? It is not at all clear what such knowledge would look like, though, and it seems unlikely that common notions of propositional knowledge would help define it any more clearly. We would end up with a formulation of a proposition that remains explicitly and irredeemably tied to, and conditional upon, the site of its articulation or disclosure: ‘*In the context of z* I know *that* x is

y,' though even that kind of articulation, which assumes that the experience of knowledge can be translated in this way, might be seen as betraying the wish for performance- or practice-specific knowledge. Then there is the additional consideration that propositional knowledge makes sense in the context of a tradition that believes in and values clarity, objectivity, truth, the accurate representation of reality, and so on. If one had to generalize, one would say that art, particularly modern art, actively tends to challenge these sorts of biases and assumptions.

So much for propositional knowledge, then. What about other forms of knowledge? What about knowledge as know-how or skill? Knowledge understood, that is, as *technê* rather than *epistêmê*. This would be articulated by 'the use of "know" plus "how" plus an infinitive' (Guess 2005, 185). For instance, I know how to play guitar, I know how to cook an omelette. Does performance, or theatre, give rise to that kind of knowledge in any particular way? It seems unpromising. Elaborating on this kind of knowledge, Geuss writes:

We speak of a person having a skill only if he or she is able to be reliably successful in bringing about a certain result. The person who has the skill must be able to bring about something *others* can recognise as a successful outcome according to relatively clear socially recognised criteria. (191)

We might make the argument that classical tragedians knew how to produce catharsis and that is not uninteresting, but it seems quite exceptional, and in terms of the acquisition of knowledge it neglects the spectator: it seems too much of a stretch to say that by watching tragedy one acquires the know-how, the craft, of the tragedian. Moreover, in the modern era theatre and performance have tended to be committed to originality and innovation. Art, since the end of the eighteenth century, if one can generalize, tends not to aspire 'to be a success by preexisting criteria, but to create new criteria by which works are to be judged' (192). It is therefore hard to see how the reliable transmission of know-how or skill, which depend upon expected patterns and repeatability could be construed as a significant feature of performance.

That seems like another dead end, then. What about another understanding of knowledge—knowledge as acquaintance-with? Here 'know' typically takes a noun or pronoun as the direct object (186).⁶ So, I can say I *know* the poetry of W.B. Yeats, or I know suffering. Is theatre or performance tied up with this sort of knowledge in any significant way? It seems more promising than the other two types of knowledge we have considered. Having watched a particularly affecting performance of *Othello*, one might say 'I know jealousy,' meaning that the performance of that play has given me a fuller and more deeply felt understanding of jealousy. Or one might watch J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and conclude that now I *know* grief. Or, in the context of contemporary performance art one might watch Ontroerend Goed's *Sirens* and conclude that one knows—that is, has become acquainted with—the trials of contemporary sexism and misogyny. Or one might have experienced Marina Abramovic's *512 Hours* and have concluded that one knows stillness or whatever it was that that performance was felt to have imparted. All of these claims to knowledge are just about plausible, though they tend to sound rather hyperbolic. The real difficulty, though, for anyone attempting to make strong epistemological claims about performance, is that once again there is

nothing practice- or performance-specific about this type of knowledge. There are likely to be other, more effective, ways of becoming acquainted with jealousy, grief, sexism, and stillness.

None of these understandings of knowledge seem promising foundations for Performance Philosophy research that seeks ways in which performance might be a kind of embodied thought, a performed thinking or a thought performance that would give rise to its own type of knowledge, its own truths. So perhaps for performance to be understood as a kind of thinking that produces knowledge, we might have to think of it as producing a new, special kind of knowledge not accounted for by traditional ideas of epistemology. If this is the case, then performance would have to be understood as also creating the conditions for the recognition and acceptance of the knowledge it produces. That is to say, there would have to be some sort of process of self-validation in performance's 'thinking.' How would that mechanism of self-validating knowledge—performance's thinking—operate? One fairly obvious avenue to explore would be the idea that performance can grant a kind of intuition through feeling. In other words, particular emotions are provoked; these emotions are by their nature self-validating—a feeling, an intuition, will be judged appropriate if it *feels* appropriate (195). Now, if this is to be understood as a type of *thinking* associated with performance, giving rise to a type of associated *knowledge*, where knowledge might be understood as a significantly—that is, non-trivially—appropriate emotional attunement to particular situations or experiences, then that would seem to imply the claim that 'there is (finally) an absolute set of correct, suitable feelings and emotions that are appropriate responses to the world' (197). These responses may not be exclusive to performance—they may not be practice-specific, in other words—but insofar as they would be produced only in a non-discursive context (whether that context be performance or some other artistic experience), and would be understood feelingly rather than in a rational way, reducible to propositional knowledge, they might still serve to justify a claim to a non-traditional form of thinking and knowing associated with performance that could be a focus of Performance Philosophy.

This position, often associated with Romanticism (194), cannot, however, be an answer to the search for a different kind of knowledge particular to performance. It simply does not square with the diversity of responses that performance, theatre, and art more generally provoke. Furthermore, it draws on a rather undertheorized and popular version of Romanticism, of the sort that would suggest that it is only through the right emotional or intuitive acquaintance with the world that we can 'know' it aright. Perhaps more appropriate would be a consideration of a more thoroughly theorized version of Romanticism. German Romanticism, the site of the most philosophically sophisticated articulation of Romanticism, might prove a particularly illuminative parallel here insofar as it sought to establish what, emphasising the parallel, we might call 'Poetry Philosophy.'

While seeming to answer Plato's rejection of poetry as capable of operating as a philosophical organon, the immediate prompt to the development of German Romanticism was a perceived crisis in philosophy. Since Descartes's thought-experiment of radical scepticism and the consequent positioning of a reflective, self-certain subject at the heart of thought, questions of epistemology became increasingly entangled with questions of subjectivity. If the self is in a constant, reflective relationship with itself in all its cognitive operations, it can seemingly never free itself from itself in a manner that might allow it to know either itself or its totality, or any other things as they might be in themselves. If thought cannot, without remainder, think its own reflective ground, a split opens up between the thinking subject and the thought object, and it is out of that split that the threat of scepticism—and, indeed, nihilism—can emerge. These apparent limitations to philosophical thought led J.G. Fichte, who supported Kant's critical endeavours, while judging them inadequately expressed, to posit a self-positing I that underlies and makes possible all thought. However, he was unable—precisely because of those limitations—to give a full and adequate account of that self-positing I. Reacting to Fichte, the early German Romantics took as their starting point this conflict between the realisation that reflective consciousness is inherently limited, and therefore bound to taint all putatively objective knowledge, on the one hand, and the continuing desire to know the unifying absolute that would transcend these limitations, on the other. Torn between what Fichte called 'the incapacity and the demand' ([1794] 1982, 201), the Romantics came to think that although this absolute cannot be accessed by philosophy, it might be possible that the artistic performance of the *failure* of reflective thought could rupture the subjectivism of thought's finite, conceptualising grasp sufficiently for a space to be created in the artwork in which that which exceeds ordinary consciousness may in some way become apparent, even if only indirectly. Of course, this rupture would not provide a substantive alternative to rational, reflective, everyday thinking, and it risks being immediately co-opted by the subjectivity of rational thought. And so, in the wake of philosophy's seemingly futile endeavours, the most that can be achieved for Romantics like Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, using terminology influenced by Fichte, even as they reject him, is an alternating proof (*Wechselerweis*), a wavering (*Schweben*) between the world as we know it and an imagined pure world beyond, uncoloured by our thinking—a wavering, that is to say, between subjectivism and a pure objectivity, which translates in our experience as a wavering between determinacy and indeterminacy. Unable to get beyond one's subject/object perspective in order to grasp the world as it is in itself, this sense of something beyond, something utterly different, is, for the Romantics, as close as one can get to the absolute, which, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point out, should in this context be understood as the unconditioned self-making (that is, *autopoietic*) whole from which reflective thought seems to alienate us (1988, 48–9). It is this context, and these ideas, that form the basis of what might be called Romanticism's aesthetics of failure. This widely influential understanding and configuration of art emerged in the belief that in response to the apparent limitations of philosophical investigation, a sort of heightened experience or apophatic insight might be achieved by means of artworks that somehow perform artistically and productively the failure of reflective consciousness.

For Schlegel, the moment of indeterminate otherness in the artwork constitutes the 'real' in contrast to the idealism of one's subjective perspective ([1799] 1968, 83). It was to be the task of poetry to hover, alternating between the real and the ideal. In the *Athenaeum* fragments he calls this 'transcendental poetry,' which would make manifest a moment of absolute indeterminacy in an otherwise determinate artwork, so that the work alternates undecidedly between the two, teetering on the verge of collapse ([1798–1800] 1971, 195). This is the moment of the work's self-critique: the dynamic between determinacy and dissolution would be the critical *unworking* that is the *work* of the Romantic work (Blanchot [1974] 1993, 357). In this critical moment the work ruptures its (that is to say, our) subjective, conceptualizing grasp of the world. Ironically, therefore, it is precisely this rupture, this dissolution in indeterminacy of the seemingly objective, that constitutes an objective moment in the Romantic work. As such, in the apparent breakdown of the artwork, we are momentarily carried (by the work) beyond ourselves and our perspectival finitude. In this brief moment, the self-critical work opens us to *what we are not* by performing its own failure, which is also our own failure. Failure, then—and this is perhaps the central paradox undergirding early German Romanticism—is something to be achieved. In this sense, the Romantic artwork should be both complete and incomplete—indeed, incompletable—where 'it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible' (Schlegel 1971, 204). The fragmentary ideal of the Romantic work is to be endlessly becoming in self-critical dissolution. This is what Schlegel means when he argues that Romantic irony should be employed to bring the artwork 'to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction' (167). Similarly, he also writes: 'An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts' (176). As Maurice Blanchot makes clear, the point of the self-critical Romantic fragment is not to realize the whole but to signal it by suspending it (Blanchot [1974] 1993, 353). '[O]nly what is incomplete [...] can take us further', as Novalis wrote sometime between 1797 and 1798 ([1802] 1997, 65). In this context Romanticism constitutes the moment when '[l]iterature [...] suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself, and, in this manifestation, has no other task or trait than to declare itself' (Blanchot [1974] 1993, 354).

This early German Romantic understanding of the function of poetry, and literature more generally, though never again articulated so rigorously, went on to shape profoundly modern thinking about the literary arts. The notion that the written word, in its failings and inadequacy, can somehow be interpreted as bearing witness to a type of knowledge that cannot be grasped directly—a sort of literary *via negativa*—has proved hugely influential. It is an understanding of Romanticism that is no doubt not as readily identifiable as the sort of broad cultural understanding of Romanticism associated with authentic emotional and intuitive attunement, as discussed earlier, but, acknowledged or otherwise, it continues to inform contemporary theoretical discourse, and it perhaps offers a useful lead in thinking about how an artform can be understood as a form of thinking. It is certainly the case that the legacy of early German Romanticism can be seen informing discussions of literature's relationship with thought. An early intervention in the contemporary debate on this topic is Pierre Macherey's *À quoi pense la littérature?* (1990), translated into English as *The Object of Literature*. Pursuing the question 'What form of thought is contained in literary texts, and can it be extracted from them?', Macherey writes:

Literature and philosophy are inextricably entwined [*mêlées*]. Or at least they were until history established a sort of official division between the two. That occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, when the term 'literature' began to be used in its modern sense. (1995, 3)

Tellingly, he suggests that '[t]his modernity is illustrated perfectly by the mythology of the absent Book (or the "book to come") which, from the poet and theorists of the Athenaeum to Mallarmé and then Blanchot, commemorates the lost community of literature and philosophy' (13). Recently it is this Romantic line of thought that has led Ben Lerner to conclude that '[t]he poem is always a record of failure' (2016, 13) and that '[p]oetry isn't hard: it's impossible' (14). For Lerner, it is the failure of poem which holds open the place for a poetry-to-come: 'There is no genuine poetry; there is only, after all, a place for it' (18), and "'Poetry" becomes a word for that possibility whose absence we sense in [...] poems' (91).

Stathis Gourgouris, in *Does Literature Think?*, sees early German Romanticism as marking the emergence of literature as 'an interrogative, self-reflexive, theoretical practice':

In their influential treatment of German Romanticism, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe explicitly propose researching what they call 'theoretical romanticism' outside of any periodizing notions of Romanticism (as school, movement, literary tendency, etc.), in order to disentangle what they identify as literature's first theoretical instance. (2003, 5)

Interestingly, Gourgouris characterizes literature's theoretical mode as performative (11), suggesting that as such it 'challenges our usual definitions of knowledge in strict conceptual terms':

Instead, it demands that we account for the implicit, the nonpalpable, the ineffable, the perfectly contingent. It demands a nonalgorithmic, nonpropositional, 'noncognitive,' but nonetheless *expert* knowledge [...]. (18)

As Terrance Cave puts it in *Thinking with Literature*, 'literature is both an instrument and a vehicle of thought. The kind of thinking it affords may in some cases be close to philosophical, ethical, or political thought, but it is never reducible to those modes' (2016, 12).

Performance philosophy: failing to think?

The broadly Romantic example of how literature has been theorized as an organon of thought might provide cues for how Performance Philosophy might conceive of performance as a type of thinking. What seems particularly pertinent is the way in which Romanticism mapped out an aesthetics of failure wherein the experience of *not-knowing* serves a philosophical function, bringing us closer to truth. This does not result in knowledge *per se*, but, the idea goes, it renders us less deceived about the world. Although this is hardly thinking in any classical sense, it could be understood as an implicitly cognitive operation, albeit one that is integrated into artistic practice.

Except that it never really was. The problem with Romanticism as the theoretical self-realisation of literature is that it remained too theoretical and was never properly integrated into artistic practice in the way that it was envisioned. As Blanchot puts it, early German Romanticism was 'rich in projects,' but 'poor in works' ([1974] 1993, 252). Simon Critchley expands on this judgement:

[R]omanticism fails because neither Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, nor the other romantics, made good on their promise for an artwork, a new mythology, a literary absolute that would reconcile the crisis of post-Kantian modernity and overcome nihilism. (1997, 94)

Hegel—no fan of Romanticism in any case—likened Schlegel's poetry to 'the flattest prose' ([1835] 1975, 296). Ultimately, then, the 'interrogative, self-reflexive, theoretical practice' announced by Romanticism remained too artificial, too extraneous, and too programmatic. Viewed from a broader historical perspective it seems to remain implicitly too accepting of the Platonic division of poetry and philosophy, from which position it then attempts to articulate a rapprochement. Ironically, although the attempt to delineate a primary philosophical function for art might seem anti-Platonic insofar as it would appear to overturn Plato's proscription of the poets, by putting poetry into the service of a philosophical objective established *a priori*—that is, to bring us closer to the absolute—Romanticism simply reinscribes even more deeply the Platonic instrumentalization of art for the sake of pre-existing ideas. The theoretical moment of Romanticism, therefore, to reiterate, remains extraneous.

Therein, however, perhaps lies performance's crucial difference, and perhaps provides the justification for Performance Philosophy's fixation upon it as possibly constituting a distinctive form of thinking. Performance seems to offer a model for a more integrated self-realising variation of an aesthetics of failure, where the demonstration of the inadequacy of existing knowledge and ways of articulating the world and our experience of it is not the primary motivating force (as it was with Romanticism) but is, instead, simply the result of the way performance manifests, through its determining capacity for playful and self-reflective creation, a rejection of the hegemony of the *a priori* and the tyranny of the given.⁷ Conceived as such it might, in fact, be understood as naming more accurately than the word 'poetry' does precisely what it was that Plato feared in the art of ancient tragedians, namely unbounded mimetic performance that manifests a fundamental *irresponsibility* towards established ideas of knowledge and truth. The sort of imitation, in other words, that has the power to create its own original, a process that, as Socrates admits, we find inherently pleasurable and compelling. Rather than producing a faithful copy, then, exaggerated, unbounded, performative mimesis is sufficiently removed from any *a priori* model for its productions to be viewed as something new and alternative. Indeed, it is perhaps the fundamental irresponsibility of mimetic performance, its exuberant autotelicity and disclocation from *a priori* conceptions of truth and knowledge, that makes it valuable as an essentially creative act.⁸ Like Romanticism, then, at least as far as it was imagined, performance would have the capacity to *unfix* ideas, but not, crucially, as a consequence of an *a priori* philosophical judgement about the world and our relationship to it, but rather as an epiphenomenon of its own self-motivated practice. This

is not to say that literature itself is not capable of operating in this way—I would argue that it certainly is and that that capacity should be understood as performance too. The fault of Romanticism was to explicitly put that quality into the service of a distinct theoretical agenda, thereby diminishing it. If this autotelic, performative unfixing constitutes *thinking*, then it is a form of thinking that does not result in any positive knowledge. On the contrary, it is precisely only insofar as it demonstrates a *failure* of knowledge that it can be understood as any sort of thinking at all. In so doing it might be understood as clearing the way for more conventional philosophical knowledge to follow. Performance, then, would constitute a ‘thinking practice’ that simultaneously opens the space of philosophy while challenging it to respond.

Hasn’t that always been the case, though? Which, in itself, is not to doubt the importance of Performance Philosophy’s efforts to explore this side of performance further. In this regard it is certainly an important development for anyone with a theoretical interest in performance—and performance, through the execution of an aesthetic procedure of failure, may well be understood as involving a cognitive operation. But if it holds that performance at its purest manifests a disregard for the tyranny of the *a priori*, then one ought to be wary of any framework that, implicitly or otherwise, and to whatever degree, sets expectations for performance. That would be, even if only in a small way, to restrict the radically inventive freedom of performance and make it beholden to the *a priori*. That way philosophy, not thinking, lies.

Notes

¹ Shannon Jackson (2011, 1–3) remarks that ‘[i]n recent decades, artists and art critics have tried to make sense of a variety of performative turns’ and suggests that ‘one way of characterizing the “performative turn” in art practice is to foreground its fundamental interest in the nature of sociality.’ Tracy C. Davis (2008, 1) seems to position the turn as more recent and as part of a more general transformation of the arts and humanities: ‘Since the 1970s, we have marked the “linguistic turn” (emphasizing language’s role in constructing perception), the ‘cultural turn’ (tracking the everyday meanings of culture, and culture’s formative effect on identities), and more recently the ‘performative turn’ (acknowledging how individual behaviour derives from collective, even unconscious, influences and is manifest as observable behavior, both overt and quotidian, individual and collective).’ Erika Fisher-Lichte (2005, 237), however, argues that the recent performative turn is not the first of its kind: ‘The new performative turn that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s is, in some ways, reminiscent of the performative turn that happened at the turn of the twentieth century [...]’

² The relation between classical Greek poets and performance is something I explore in another article published in *Performance Philosophy* (2015, 37–8).

³ For more on the anti-theatrical prejudice see Jonas Barish (1981) and Martin Puchner (2010).

⁴ The word ‘affordances’ is worth pausing over. Terence Cave (2016) asks of literature some of the same questions I am asking of Performance Philosophy regarding ‘thinking.’ Cave refers to literature as ‘an animated affordance’ (9), extending the usage of James J. Gibson’s (1986) coinage of the word in the context of ‘affordance theory’ as ‘what the environment offers the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill.’ As such, Cave argues, ‘it becomes possible to redescribe the relationship between form and its particular instantiation not as a relation between vehicle and content, but as an ecological, adaptive, and ultimately innovative interaction’ (56). A ‘cognitive engagement with literature’ would therefore focus on ‘the kinds of thinking that are afforded by literature, where “thinking” means cognitive activity that includes emotion, imagination, kinesic response, and (not least) interaction with other humans and the world at large’ (155).

⁵ The reference here, of course, is to Puchner (2010).

⁶ A more complex picture of knowledge by acquaintance, see Bertrand Russell's 'On Denoting' (1905).

⁷ However, it is worth noting a decidedly more Romantic conception of the relationship between performance, failure and thought as noted in a particular experience by Stephanie Husel: '[T]he first time I came across the idea that performance could be described as a "thinking process" was when I got to know the Sheffield-based theatre company Forced Entertainment; I saw their first piece *First Night* in 2001. In this show, eight entertainer-characters present a vaudeville show, full of laughter and glamour, stunts and skits. And everything goes awfully, desperately, wrong. Playing out this very ironic scenario of failure, showing the frame of theatre almost breaking down over two hours playtime, this show taught me a great deal about performance as such. It made me feel very involved with the piece and with its figures. What struck me was that *First Night* directed the attention of its spectators towards the very situation of the performance. In doing so, it presented me/us with a "thinking about the here-and-now" that was actually happening in the "here and now" (2013, 89).

⁸ For a fuller treatment of this idea, see my previous article in *Performance Philosophy* (2015).

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Biography

James Corby is a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of English at the University of Malta, where he lectures on literary theory, poetry, and philosophy. He is the founding co-editor of the academic journal *CounterText*, published by Edinburgh University Press, and is a founding member of the Futures of Literature Network. He has published on literature, and philosophy, including articles on romanticism, modernism, phenomenology, performance, politics, and contemporary American literature. He co-edited *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2013) with Ivan Callus and Gloria Lauri-Lucente, and edited a special issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research* on "Critical Distance" (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

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